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Against all odds, Black residents built something remarkable in Altadena. Then the fire came - Los Angeles Times

Brittny Mejia

17–21 minutes

The four-bedroom home on Highview Avenue that Olsen J. Rogers bought in 1963 was a far cry from the Texas farm given to his family by the man who enslaved his grandmother.

The two-bedroom house along East Altadena Drive was purchased by William Ransom James, “BJ,” on a predominantly Black cul-de-sac in 1968. He worked three jobs to help pay it off.

And the four-bedroom house on North Lake Avenue was where Blossom Powe, originally from St. Louis, raised her children in integrated schools in 1973 and wrote poetry about being Black in America.

These homes and other structures were monuments to the Black residents drawn to Altadena, first as domestic workers

in the estates of millionaires and later as a rising middle class of professionals who had broken glass ceilings.

Altadena, population nearly 42,000, is the town where the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. once visited lawyer Clarence B. Jones to persuade him to join his legal team. Where sci-fi author Octavia E. Butler is buried alongside abolitionists. Where a park is named after Charles White, a local artist whose work portrayed Black history.

“You’re talking about generations of families that have lived there,” former Vice President Kamala Harris said at a recent breakfast celebrating King — and mourning Altadena. They were “some of the first hardworking Black families who were able to buy property in California and then pass down those homes through generations.”

Then the Eaton fire came, tearing through more than 14,000 acres, wiping out more than 9,000 structures, many of them homes — and decades of history. Of the 17 people who died in the Eaton fire, at least seven were Black.

The fire turned to ash homes that had been humble museums for treasured collections: the records of Count Basie, Nat King Cole, Ray Charles; paddles from Kappa Alpha Psi, a historically Black fraternity; typewritten memoirs, poetry and documents capturing lives of struggle and triumph.

Here, residents found fewer housing restrictions and

neighbors who were generally more welcoming than those in other cities and towns — allowing them to thrive, raise families, build longstanding businesses.

But Altadena was an imperfect paradise for its Black population. Many were boxed out of neighborhoods east of Lake Avenue because of redlining and settled in West Altadena. They faced racism from white neighbors who felt threatened by increasing diversity. They struggled with gentrification, one reason the town's Black population has dropped to 18%, down from 43% in 1980.

In a community built against all odds, Black residents now face their biggest challenge yet: How to rebuild.

What lies ahead

Nailah Tatum had just turned 31, but she didn't feel much like celebrating.

Her family had spent the predawn hours of her birthday — one her mom notes she shares with King — packing up their car with the few possessions they were able to grab from her grandfather's home where they lived on Highview Avenue. They were preparing to leave the Residence Inn in Arcadia, their third move since the Eaton fire, to a still unknown hotel arranged through their insurance company.

Tatum wore a black hoodie emblazoned with the word "blessed." She had taken time off work as a behavioral

therapist for two school districts, unable to focus while worrying about where she'd rest her head at night.

Lea Rogers moved into a hotel in Arcadia with her son, daughter and dog after her family home was burned down by the Eaton fire.

(Jason Armond/Los Angeles Times)

Tatum's mother, Lea Rogers, had hidden the presents she'd purchased for Tatum under her bed. They were lost within the rubble of their fire-ravaged home: loungewear, blanket, bumblebee sweater and beanie — all yellow, Tatum's favorite color.

But gifts could be replaced. What hurt most was losing the memoirs, both hand- and typewritten, that belonged to her late grandfather, Olsen J. Rogers, and grandmother,

Wendell Lea Rogers; the photos Tatum was restoring for her mother, the sole surviving Rogers child, and for her cousins; the toys and baby shoes belonging to her older brother who died of cancer.

“You just can’t get these things back,” Tatum said. The hotel couch where she sat on this bleak birthday morning doubled as her mother’s bed. Except these days her mother rarely slept.

The family plans to rebuild in Altadena, but Tatum said they worry about developers buying out other Black residents. Not only did Tatum lose the home where she, her mother and brother lived. Many family members on her father’s side also lost their houses. Her cousins questioned whether an uncle would live to see his house rebuilt.

“I’m nervous there’s not going to be a Black community in Altadena anymore,” Tatum said.

What came before

A Black community like the one that dates back more than a century, when domestic workers helped maintain estates along Millionaire’s Row.

For decades, Black residents made up less than 1% of the town’s population — until the ‘50s ushered in a sea change. School desegregation. Construction of the Foothill Freeway, which displaced hundreds in Pasadena who moved north to

the other ‘dena. Wilfred Duncan, Pasadena’s first black firefighter, was among the new arrivals.

The civil rights movement coincided with a building boom in Altadena. Slowly, the Black population began to inch higher, up to 4% in 1960. But redlining forced many to settle west of Lake Avenue, where they found affordable homes, fewer housing restrictions and neighbors sharing the same struggles.

Anti-Black slogans and swastikas defaced a Jewish center, a church, a school and a freeway underpass in 1961. A month later, anti-Black obscenities were sprayed on nine homes in northwest Altadena. Three years later, a 20-by-40-inch cross was planted on the lawn of a Black resident — who had moved in east of Lake Avenue — with the words: “not wanted here.”

It was in this environment that Jones, then an entertainment lawyer, moved to Altadena, purchasing the home on Highview Avenue where a tree grew in the middle of the living room. The real estate broker, he recalled, was none too thrilled that he and his wife, an interracial couple, were moving in.

The broker warned Jones to be gentle with his white neighbors, to ease them into the idea that a Black man and a white woman were moving next door. Do not, she told Jones, mow the front lawn in your shorts.

“I’m not worried about how these people are feeling,” Jones recalled thinking. “I did it anyway.”

It was his home that King visited on a Friday evening in February 1960 to persuade Jones to join his legal team in Alabama. Although Jones turned down the offer, he said in an interview, he went to hear King preach in Baldwin Hills.

Jones recalled being mesmerized as King told the middle-class congregation about the role and responsibility to “help our less fortunate brothers and sisters who are struggling for their freedom in the South.” Immediately after the service, Jones went up to King and said, “When do you want me to come to Alabama?”

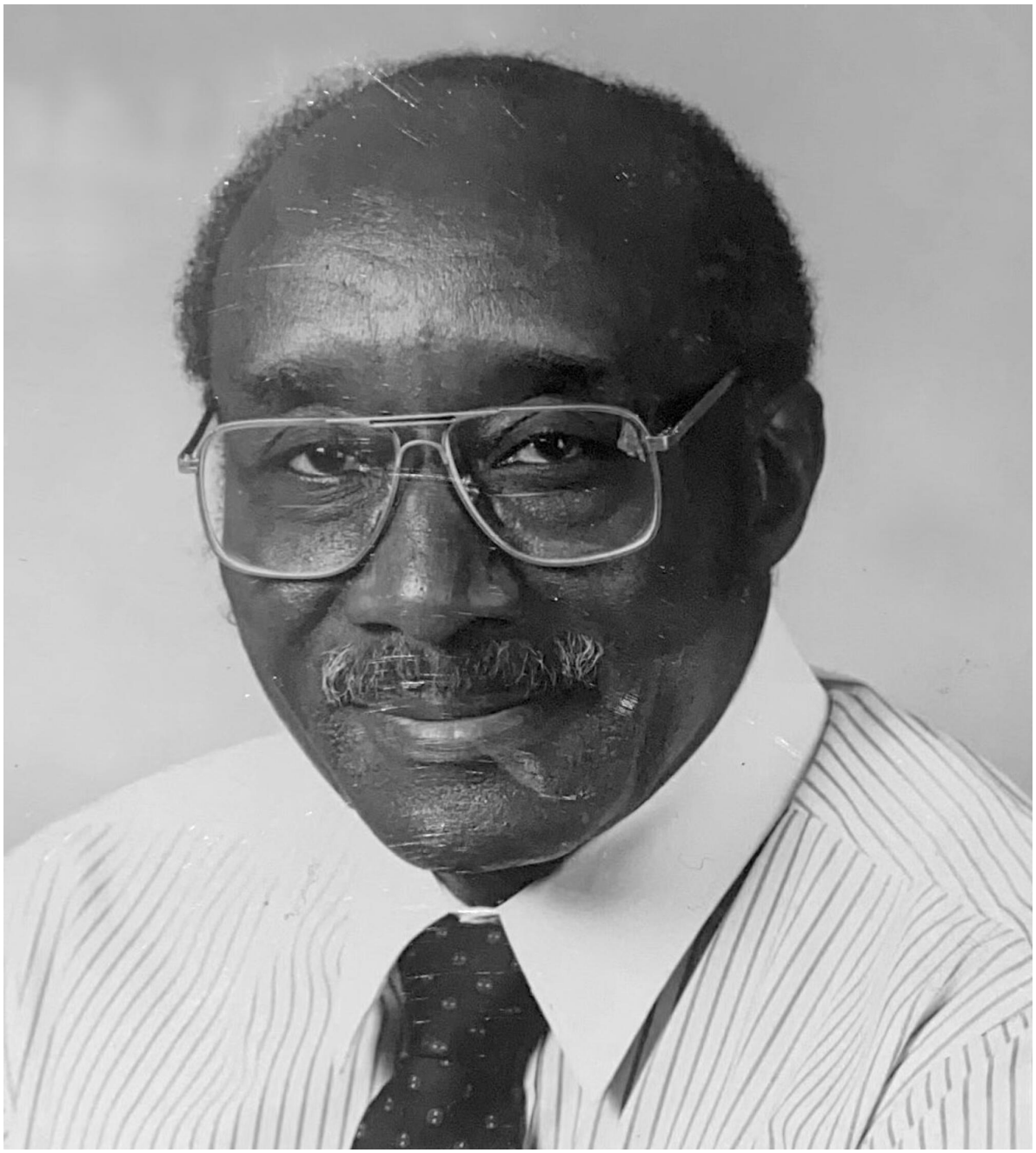
Jones was eventually honored for his activism on behalf of civil rights. He not only advised King on legal matters, but he also helped write the first seven and a half paragraphs of one of the most famous speeches in U.S. history, “I Have a Dream.”

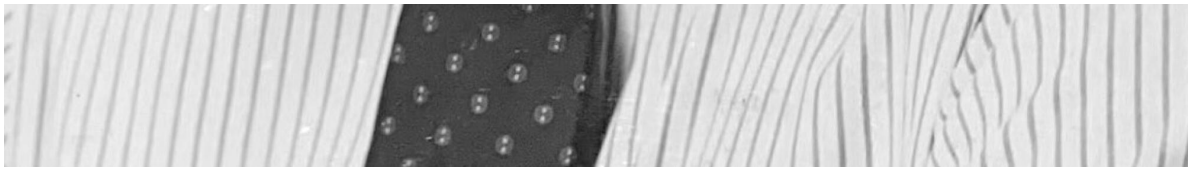
“When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. ... Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check; a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds.’ ”

Olsen J. Rogers – 1963

By the time Rogers bought his Altadena home, he was well-versed in hardship.

He had gone from picking cotton in Oakland, Texas, to fighting in World War II before studying engineering at USC. That's where he failed a math test, was called out in front of the class by a professor — who Lea said discounted her father for being Black — and then studied calculus for days until it finally clicked and he aced every test.





(Courtesy of Rogers family)

Rogers went on to become a chemist at the Department of Water and Power, where a staff photo showed him as the only Black man among a sea of white faces. His wife Wendell, "Gwen," had graduated from a Chicago high school at 16 and later worked as a special education teacher in California. Both obtained master's degrees: his in engineering, hers in education.

They bought the house — designed by modernist architect Gregory Ain — on Highview Avenue, where they raised three children. Lea, who was born in 1969, said the area was already diversifying enough that she didn't pay attention to color.

But she recalled a time her father had outscored all his colleagues on a test for a promotion — but still feared he wouldn't get it because of his race.

"'Olsen, it's OK, you know, you're gonna make it through," his wife consoled him. "God's gonna get you through it ... don't get upset if you don't get it.'"

"I'm the best qualified, I should be able to get it," he told Gwen. "I don't see why I shouldn't."

He got the job.

As the years passed, Lea's father would tell her that buying the house in Altadena "was the best decision he ever made."

When Gwen was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease, Rogers cared for her, even after he was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Lea and her children moved back in to help care for her parents, who were both on hospice. They died a year apart — in 2010 and 2011 — in the home where they'd raised their family.

Lea Rogers' family home burned in the Eaton fire in Altadena.

(Jason Armond/Los Angeles Times)

That home burned down on Jan. 8.

William "BJ" Ransom James – 1968

James' family had been in the Pasadena area since the early 1900s. His grandfather left Cleveland for Southern California and started a rubber hose business on Green Street.

When James was looking to buy a home, his wife's grandfather — a real estate agent of very fair complexion — had access to properties that other Black people didn't, and showed James two houses in Altadena.

William Y. Ransom, Virginia Flemming Ransom and Marguerite Louis Ransom.

(Courtey of the Ransom family)

One was on the predominantly white east side of town and was priced at $40,000. The other, a 1,000-square-foot home, cost $19,000 and was located on a predominantly Black cul-de-sac west of Lake Avenue in Central Altadena.

“His dad said, ‘Do you want to have to work that hard to keep your house?’” recounted James’ son, Brian. James opted for the second home.

Still, James worked three jobs to ensure his family had a roof over their heads and food on the table. He was a leadman at Pasadena’s Water and Power Department and worked in maintenance at dental buildings and in gardening on the weekends.

Brian grew up playing baseball, hide-and-seek and kickball

with nearly a dozen neighbor kids — staying outdoors until it grew dark under the watchful eye of a rotating cast of parents.

“We often hear the phrase, ‘It takes a village.’ That was the village,” said Brian, who called Altadena “a large town, with a very small hometown feel.”

(Courtesy of the Ransom family)

Although Brian went away to USC for college — he eventually earned doctorates in education and law — he returned to Altadena in 1991 and bought a home of his own. James and his wife, Linda, helped drive Brian's children to and from school and would watch them do their homework in the house where they'd raised their own children.

Linda passed away in 2006. James, who once knew every street in Pasadena, was diagnosed with dementia in 2023. He stayed in his home on East Altadena Drive until last year. After that, he was in and out of the hospital and care facilities.

Brian James and his daughter, Samantha, look over the destroyed stables, used by the family's horses at one time, in the backyard of their family home in Altadena. The main

portion of their home is still standing.

(Genaro Molina/Los Angeles Times)

The original house James turned down, Brian said, “is probably worth three million dollars, and his house might be worth half that.”

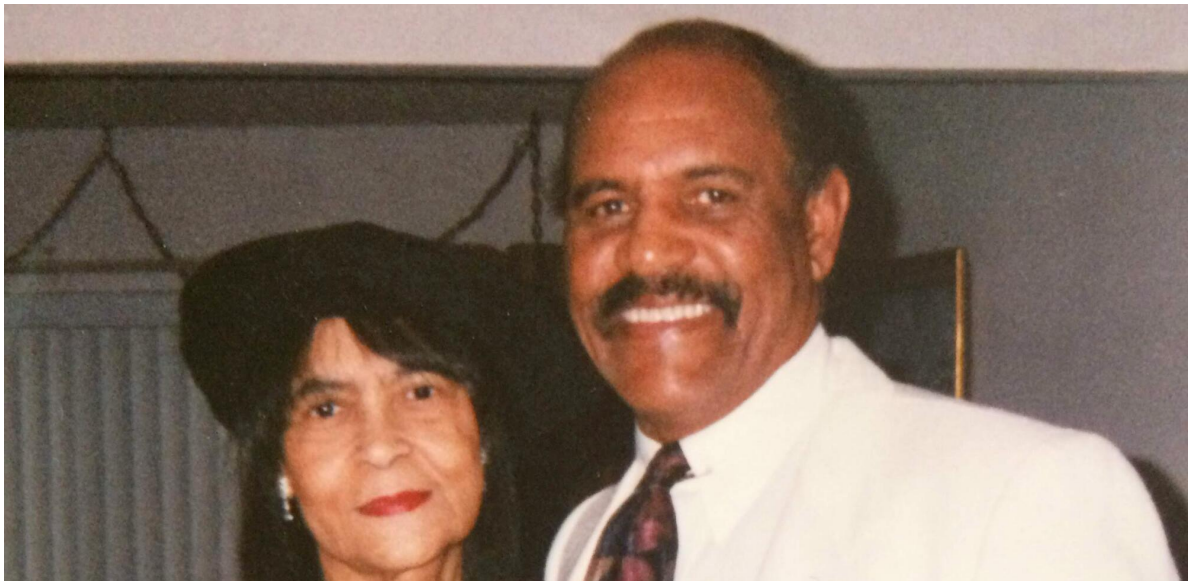
“But in terms of the richness, the community, the relationships that were created from that little neighborhood, money can never buy it,” Brian said.

That home burned down, too.

Blossom Powe – 1973

Powe went to Altadena after the Watts riots in 1965.

She had joined the Watts Writers Workshop, which shared poetry in mainly Black communities around the L.A. area, including Altadena. Powe fell in love with the town’s beauty and moved there with her husband, Robert, whom she met at Jefferson High School, and their children in 1973.



An undated photo of Blossom Powe with her husband, Robert, whom she met in high school. The couple moved to Altadena in 1973 with their children.

(Courtesy of Powe family)

For Powe's daughter, Angela, the move to Altadena came the summer after 10th grade. She said it was a dramatic shift from a predominantly Black high school in L.A. to one she described as a "melting pot."

"I had never experienced that before," she said.

The feel of Altadena was in sharp contrast to Angela's childhood memories visiting her mom's hometown of St. Louis. She recalled seeing segregation play out there along a main road, with predominantly white people on one side and Black residents on the other.

"In California, everybody mingles and mixes," she said. But in St. Louis, "as a kid, I'm like, 'Why can't we go over there?' And my great uncles would say: 'We don't go over there. You stay away from there, you stay on this side. Just leave those people alone.'"

Angela's mother was a poet; her father worked in aerospace. Black history novels filled the shelves in their

home, and Count Basie, Duke Ellington and Billie Holiday records, among others, formed the soundtrack of their lives.

For several years, Robert served as treasurer for the Altadena NAACP and also joined the Optimist Club.

“Anything that helped Black people and exposed them to a better life,” Angela said.

Robert died in 2006, Powe in 2012. But they left behind a community.

Although Angela left, she eventually returned in 1994, buying a home there. Her brother bought a house there too. Her cousin moved from New York and did the same.

The fire consumed four of the family homes, including her mother’s.

‘Black Phoenix’

The Eaton fire began to tear through Altadena on the evening of Jan. 7.

A firefighter turns away from windblown smoke while providing structure protection on the Eaton fire in Altadena.

(Gina Ferazzi/Los Angeles Times)

Tatum's family had not received an evacuation order, but they went in shifts through the night to check the fire's progress. They packed what they could by flashlight after losing power earlier that evening.

Around 3:30 a.m., Lea could see the fire from her driveway, a blazing orange red. It was only when they were leaving around an hour later that they heard a sheriff's deputy telling residents to evacuate.

Along Highview Avenue, the fire burned down to the curbs, charring numbers that identified which house had once stood where. Gone was the wall that held Rogers' Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity paddles. The memoirs and photos Tatum, the family organizer, stored in her room, were lost to the flames.

Half a mile away, Brian walked through the remains of his father's house last week. He was struck by the fact that a 1,500-square-foot home that had felt like 2,500 now seemed no larger than a garage. If there was any kind of blessing, he said, it's that his father has dementia and doesn't realize

what happened to the home he worked so hard for.

James died last weekend. He was 89.

Brian's home on Canyon Ridge Drive survived, but the fire destroyed the back stables. The Altadena homes of four cousins burned down.

Brian wrote his dissertation about maintaining racial equity and equality in the face of gentrification. He said "there's a hope that Black and brown families will stay in Altadena." Although 42% of the town is white, 27% is Latino.

"There's a sincere hope that we'll weather this storm and not be susceptible to the quick money to sell but will really relish what Altadena means to the Black and brown community and stay," he said. "That's our hope and our prayer."

After the fire, a Google spreadsheet compiled GoFundMe pages for hundreds of Black families affected — the vast majority in Altadena. Two others were created for Latino and Filipino families as well.

Up Highview Avenue past Mariposa in West Altadena, green recycling bins had melted in on themselves. There were charred ruins of a dining room table no one would sit at again. A "protect our foothills" sign listed on a front lawn, steps away from the ruins of the home it had stood before.

But there were small blessings. Across the street, the one-story home King had once visited — and called "pretty nice" — was still standing, potted plants still steps away from the

front door.

Veronica Jones, the former chair of the Altadena Town Council, president of the Altadena Historical Society and lifelong Altadenan, said she hopes that with rebuilding will come balance.

In West Altadena, she said, the Charles White park is small, so too is the library. There are fewer trees, she said, than across Lake Avenue.

“I hope that as we move forward with healing and rebuilding, that some of the things of the past that continue today are corrected,” said Jones, who is not related to Clarence Jones. “That the balance of amenities and balance of things we use for our daily life, our activities, are put more in balance on the west side as the east side.”

Powe’s poetry burned along with the family’s longtime home. “Black Phoenix,” which lives online, all but predicted the coming days, months and years:

And now, Time … crawling slowly

Starts to sift through the ashes

Of this black kind of phoenix

With trembling hands—

Crying! Brooding! Trying somehow

To create … a new mosaic

From broken bricks and charcoal faces!”

Times staff researcher Scott Wilson contributed to this report.

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